

Reformation and Reconciliation

[1 Corinthians 1:10-13](#)

[2 Corinthians 5:14-20](#)

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This is the Week of Christian Unity, from January 18-25. The people in Corinth didn't know it was the Week of Christian Unity. They weren't getting along very well. I think Paul's words were like saying, "Folks, you need a Week of Christian Unity." Paul was critical of them when they said things like, "I belong to Paul." "I belong to Apollos." "I belong to Cephas." It's kind of like saying: "I'm a Methodist!" "I'm a Baptist!" "I'm a Catholic!" "I'm a Unitarian!" "I'm a Trinitarian!" "I'm an evangelical!" "I'm a progressive!"

And in our *country*, what a lot of disunity! I don't have to tell you the things people are saying. We all have our opinions and our feelings. Paul suggests we should remember what we have in common. As Christians, we have one baptism. As Americans we have one Constitution and Bill of Rights. We have always had our differences, and our world is becoming more and more diverse, as communications and immigration challenge our notions of national and cultural unity. We certainly are not a homogeneous land. Who would have thought fifty years ago, when Lynnewood was founded, that our neighbors would include every race and ethnicity, every religious practice and people with no religious practice? If we ask residents of Pleasanton, Dublin and San Ramon today who they are, they'd likely say, "I'm Hindu." "I'm Sikh." "I'm Muslim." "I'm 'none'."

The *human* point of view is to discriminate, "us" and "them," and to elevate our differences. Paul wants us to look at our society not from this human point of view, but from the point of view of Christ and to find unity. This is the "new creation" he speaks about in 2 Corinthians. This is the "ministry of reconciliation," no "us" and "them."

Easier said than done.

People have always found fault with those of different opinion. I'm grateful, though, for the brave people in our history who have looked at social systems with a critical eye. I'm thankful for reformers like Martin Luther King and his namesake, Martin Luther.

This year, 2017, marks the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's protest against the Roman Catholic Church. The country of Germany and Protestant churches around the world have begun to celebrate. Martin Luther was a Catholic monk born in Eisleben, now Germany, in 1483. Then Germany was not yet a nation; it was part of the Holy Roman Empire. Luther attended the University at Erfurt, where he earned his Master's Degree and then started to study law. But in a rainstorm, so the story goes, riding horseback, he was frightened when he heard thunder strike near him, and at that moment he promised to become a monk. He entered an Augustinian cloister and was ordained priest in 1507. Luther went on to earn his doctorate in theology and become a professor at the University of Wittenberg. In 1516, the Pope sent commissioners to collect indulgences—money paid to reduce the amount of

punishment one had to undergo because of sins. These indulgences financed the building of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Luther objected to this practice. He claimed that salvation could not be earned by buying a paper indulgence. Luther opposed the corrupt notion that "as soon as a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs" (attributed to Johann Tetzel who marketed indulgences).

Martin Luther nailed 95 theses to the door of All Saints Church in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. In two weeks the theses had spread throughout Germany, and in two months they had spread throughout all Europe. This day has become known as Reformation Day, and this year it will be the 500th anniversary of the event that symbolically started the Protestant Reformation. Luther wanted reform in the Catholic Church, for salvation by faith alone, for reliance on God and the Holy Scriptures, and for the Priesthood of all believers.

To the Catholic Church, these reforms were heresy! Pope Leo X excommunicated Luther in 1521. Nearly a century before, in 1439 Johannes Gutenberg had been the first to introduce the printing press and movable type in Europe. This invention made it possible for Luther's writing to be widely reproduced. In spite of excommunication, Luther refused to recant his writings: "Here I stand. I can do no other," he said. Europe was in turmoil, and Luther went into exile. A nobleman hid him in the Wartburg castle outside Eisenach, Germany. There Luther translated the New Testament from Latin and Greek into German, the people's language. Later he translated the whole Old Testament as well. Because of Luther and the printing press, the Bible came into the hands of the people during the 16th century Reformation.

Luther had angry words for the Pope. His writing was divisive. And yet it reformed the Church and brought about a new understanding of personal faith. People no longer had to make confession to a priest; they could ask God for forgiveness directly in prayer. People no longer had to hear only the priest read from the Bible in Latin; they could read the Bible in their own language.

Much of Luther's writing brought about reform, and yet some of it was further divisive in a negative way. Luther was vehemently anti-Semitic. He did not know Jewish people, but he lived in a town that had expelled Jews. His writing tried to convert the Jews to Christianity, and when it failed, he condemned the Jews and said they were not "the chosen people" but rather "the devil's people." Today we see how much wrong his writing has done to foster hatred against the Jewish people, who later suffered extermination in Germany under Hitler.

Luther is an example of both the positive and negative results of expressing public opinion. His protests against the status quo caused war in Germany but also reform in the Church. Eventually his teachings brought about the ecumenical movement where Catholics and Protestants have worked together, especially since World War II. But his writing against the Jews inflamed long-standing hatred and caused a divide we are still trying to heal with intentional interfaith dialogue. A week ago I met with Jews and Christians to talk about the

hateful placement of a crown of thorns and a white shroud on a Jewish Menorah during Chanukah at the Bankhead Theatre Plaza in Livermore.

And a week before that I attended a Coptic Orthodox Christmas liturgy in Hayward. Today we recognize three major groups within Christianity: Catholics, Protestants, and Eastern Orthodox Christians. In each case, the practice of religion is different, yet the beliefs are at a basic level the same. At this Coptic Orthodox Church in Hayward, I watched as a choir of men and boys chanted in an ancient Egyptian language. They were dressed in white robes with crimson stoles crisscrossed in the back with wide red and gold cummerbunds. There was incense and reading and chanting of scripture. The service went from 7:00 p.m.-12:00 midnight, January 6th, their Christmas Eve, with people coming in throughout the one hour I was there. The priest greeted me warmly. I was acknowledged as another Christian. I told him I wanted to express unity with the Coptic Christians since the bombing of the Coptic Cathedral in Cairo on Dec. 12 when 28 died. During his homily the priest spoke of these 28 "martyrs of the faith," and he said, "Jesus never said we would not have to suffer for our faith" (Fr. Bishop Ray, St. Antonius Coptic Orthodox Church).

Here's how I see it. We need to speak up when something is unjust or wrong, even if it means causing disunity. We need to protest when we see corruption and policies that do not demonstrate respect for our brothers and sisters. We need to stand in unity with Christians whose lives are threatened. And we need to work for unity beyond religious lines, too. We cannot condone acts of hatred against Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs, for example, in the United States or around the world.

There is a rather gray area between protesting against injustice and working for unity. What one person calls unjust may be for another person an ethical principle. Most controversial issues involve a difference of opinion about what is right—take abortion, or gay rights, or possession of handguns. As people of faith, ultimately, each person must decide what is right. We draw on scripture, tradition, experience, and reason to make those decisions. We draw on the three rules of our denomination: "Do good, do no harm, and stay in love with God" (Reuben Job, paraphrasing John Wesley's Three Rules). And then we speak out when we see these rules broken—that's what Martin Luther did. And then we work for peace and unity—that's what the Apostle Paul did. We need reformation and reconciliation, both.

Some of my most meaningful spiritual moments have been worshiping in places other than my own church. I have worshiped in Chuuk, Micronesia, where I was in the Peace Corps, where women sit on the floor one side and men on the other, and people not raised in that missionary church cannot take communion. Though I disliked the policy that excluded me from taking the bread and the wine, I accepted their practice. I was a visitor. For the sake of unity, I would not protest. When Jim and I were in Russia, we attended Russian Orthodox mass. I always had a scarf with me to cover my hair to respect the tradition of the people. And at a mosque in Hebron, on the West Bank, I wore a long coat to cover my arms and legs to demonstrate that same respect. The mosque is surrounded by Israeli soldiers, claiming control of the Palestinian city since the Israeli takeover in 1967. Hebron is a place in need of reconciliation. There I prayed at the tomb of Abraham—father of all three Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Within our own tradition of faith, there is certainly room for reform. I pray that we will seek to be more true to the gospel of love and to be "ambassadors for Christ" (2 Cor. 5:20). And throughout our world, there is undoubtedly room for reconciliation, accepting our differences and working together for unity.